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faith in action for social justice

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HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN AGE OF RACISM
PAGE 28

BURN IT DOWN? A CONVERSATION WITH CHRISTIAN ANARCHISTS
PAGE 34

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"THE ONLY WAY HAYAKAWA THRIVED IN THE MOVIE INDUSTRY WAS BY PLAYING INTO THE STRUCTURES OF RACISM THAT SET UP HIS STARDOM."

Hollywood's Golden Age of Racism

How early cinema nativism led an Asian American actor to success—and how the church helped crash his career.

by Chris Karnadi

28

22 **Poison to Body and Soul** Plastics are versatile and convenient—and killing us, physically and spiritually. by Sasha Adkins

34 **Burn It Down?** As people of God, Christian anarchists feel called to dismantle oppressive systems and create radical alternatives. by Betsy Shirley

39

Voices

6 **Spotlight**

9 **Hearts & Minds**
Speaking of faith in dangerous times.
by Jim Wallis

Commentary

12 Gen Z for Change
How will the youngest voters challenge the status quo? **by Claire Lorentzen**

14 Chicago Schools
Teachers and staff strike to uplift their students. **by Don V. Villar**

15 Black Voters
Black churchgoers aren't tools—or scapegoats. **by Da'Shawn Mosley**

Columns

16 Deep Economy
That bank branch is turning your money into carbon. **by Bill McKibben**

18 Soul Work
Amid seasons of doubt, God keeps creating.
by Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros

19 Under the Sun
A few floors above slave ships, we danced to Beyoncé. **by Jeania Ree V. Moore**

Eyewitness

20 Local authorities should not get to decide who lives in their state. **by Jen Smyers**

50

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Vision

Culture

39 Nonfiction
To understand the white working class, look beyond *Hillbilly Elegy.*
by Danny Duncan Collum

41 On Screen
Rian Johnson's *Knives Out* offers a merciless skewering of white privilege. **by Abby Olcese**

42 Curated
Dear friend, this is a human moment.
by Faith-Marie Zamblé

Reviews

43 Books
Petina Gappah brings characters subsumed by slavery into the light. **by Elinam Agbo**

44 An updated look at the global economy vs. Jesus. **by Bill Wylie-Kellermann**

45 Talking about sexual shame with Matthias Roberts. **by Betsy Shirley**

Poetry

46 I knew, but didn't know.
by Devon Miller-Duggan

Living the Word

48 We need worship to make sense of our activism. **by M. Daniel Carroll R.**

H'rumphs

50 Your glass is half full. (Coasters, please!)
by Ed Spivey Jr.

Illustration by Ken Davis / Photo by Christopher Smith

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From the Editor

For many people the word "anarchism" conjures up images of wanton destructiveness and lawless, violent chaos. But, as associate editor Betsy Shirley explains in these pages, Christian anarchists aren't about mayhem or violence. Rather, Shirley says, they look at the long-standing and deep-rooted injustices and oppressions in our society and don't feel that small-scale reforms will be enough: Systematic problems require systematic solutions.

Some, of course, dismiss such analysis as unpopular and unrealistic. Former President Barack Obama cautioned this fall that we must be "rooted in reality." Obama said, "The average American doesn't think we have to completely tear down the system and remake it."

That's an important conversation—between those who advocate and work for concrete, achievable improvements in the social systems that affect people's lives and those who focus on broader, structural change (and those who do both). The more we're able to see that as a creative tension and not an insurmountable barrier, the more likely it is that we'll be able to achieve steps toward real social change.

RESPONSE

Universal Basic Skepticism

In the December 2019 issue of *Sojourners* ("A Way Out?"), Danny Duncan Collum questioned whether universal basic income (UBI) is the best way to address social and economic issues in the U.S. Some readers, such as Kath Tillinghast, felt UBI offers "a modern twist on the year of Jubilee." But most shared Collum's skepticism. "God wants us to help the poor. No question!" wrote Eric Pensa. "But what is the government's track record for redistribution of wealth?" Barb Harmon said she would "rather see more generous public assistance based on regional needs instead of a UBI that will never be fair to all." Or as Linda Brylewski put it: "Let's have universal health care first."

Write us: response@sojo.net

"Magnificat," by Ben Wildflower

"PEOPLE ARE TRAPPED IN HISTORY AND HISTORY IS TRAPPED IN THEM."

James Baldwin
American novelist, playwright, and activist

CONTRIBUTING

Sasha Adkins
Environmental health lecturer Sasha Adkins is on a mission to "figure out what it looks like to live in a world where no one is considered trash." As a college student, Adkins began training as a midwife in the heavily polluted city of El Paso—an experience that led to the realization that "we can't have healthy people in an unhealthy environment." Adkins finds hope teaching college students about the interconnectedness of environmental issues and the soul (p. 22).

Chris Karnadi
Sojourners' culture columnist Chris Karnadi didn't visit an art museum until he was 18 years old. "My education in terms of art and culture happened pretty late in the game," he admits. Diving into culture as an adult, he recalls being captivated by work spanning from the landscape paintings of Frederic Edwin Church to the hip-hop of Kendrick Lamar. He now writes about art and culture as a way to express "stories that need to be told" (p. 28), particularly about marginalized communities.

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1

HEARTS & MINDS BY JIM WALLIS

A TEST OF FAITH

Last fall, I went on a 20-city book tour for my new book, *Christ in Crisis: Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus*. I was deeply encouraged by the "new and needed conversations about Jesus," as they were often called, that we had with diverse gatherings of thousands of people. Most events produced a public discussion on the meaning of faith and public life in America.

As a result of that tour and the national events that were unfolding alongside it, I came to three principal conclusions:

First, between the impeachment process and the upcoming election, we are facing a *test of democracy*.

Second, we are facing a *test of faith* in how religious communities respond to this moral, political, and constitutional crisis.

* * *

"THIS IS A PERIOD LIKE NO OTHER IN OUR LIFETIMES."

Illustration by Heidi Younger

"GOING BACK TO JESUS IS THE BEST WAY FORWARD."

Third, a new generation is watching and will decide their future relationship to the faith community on the basis of that response.

Where were the voices of faith? This will be the question when people look back on this period in history, and that makes it an urgent question for all of us right now. That is the key question I will be asking as this new year unfolds. I have put my voice out there with the new book, to a deep response so far, and will continue to do that in the weeks and months ahead.

Now I am asking others—all of us—to raise our voices in each of our circles of relationships and influence. I believe more voices of faith need to enter the public narrative all over the country in this impeachment and election season.

Convening conversations about what Jesus taught and how it applies to this moment is something concrete we can all do as we enter into 2020. This is about Jesus, and not just politics, and I am now convinced that going back to Jesus is the best way forward for Christians in our bitterly divided country.

This is a period like no other in our lifetimes. But I would invite us all to take heart from the knowledge that Christians in other historical eras have often gone back to their obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ—both personal and public—in times of crisis. It's called coming home. Proclaiming what that means to each of us, and calling all our siblings in Christ to do the same, has the potential to help break down the traditional political barriers that threaten to tear this nation apart.

The good news that I can enthusiastically share after a month on the road is this: Jesus has survived us Christians, and many people—both inside the churches and outside—are hungry to talk about him.

I always listen carefully to the words I hear after speaking or preaching—when people come up, shake hands after a service, or ask me to sign their book. The two words I consistently heard on this tour were *encouragement* and *hope*. People often said they came to the event feeling discouraged and hopeless—and left feeling inspired and hopeful. That's what a focus on Jesus can do for us, even in the direst times. ⊗

Jim Wallis is editor-in-chief of *Sojourners* magazine.

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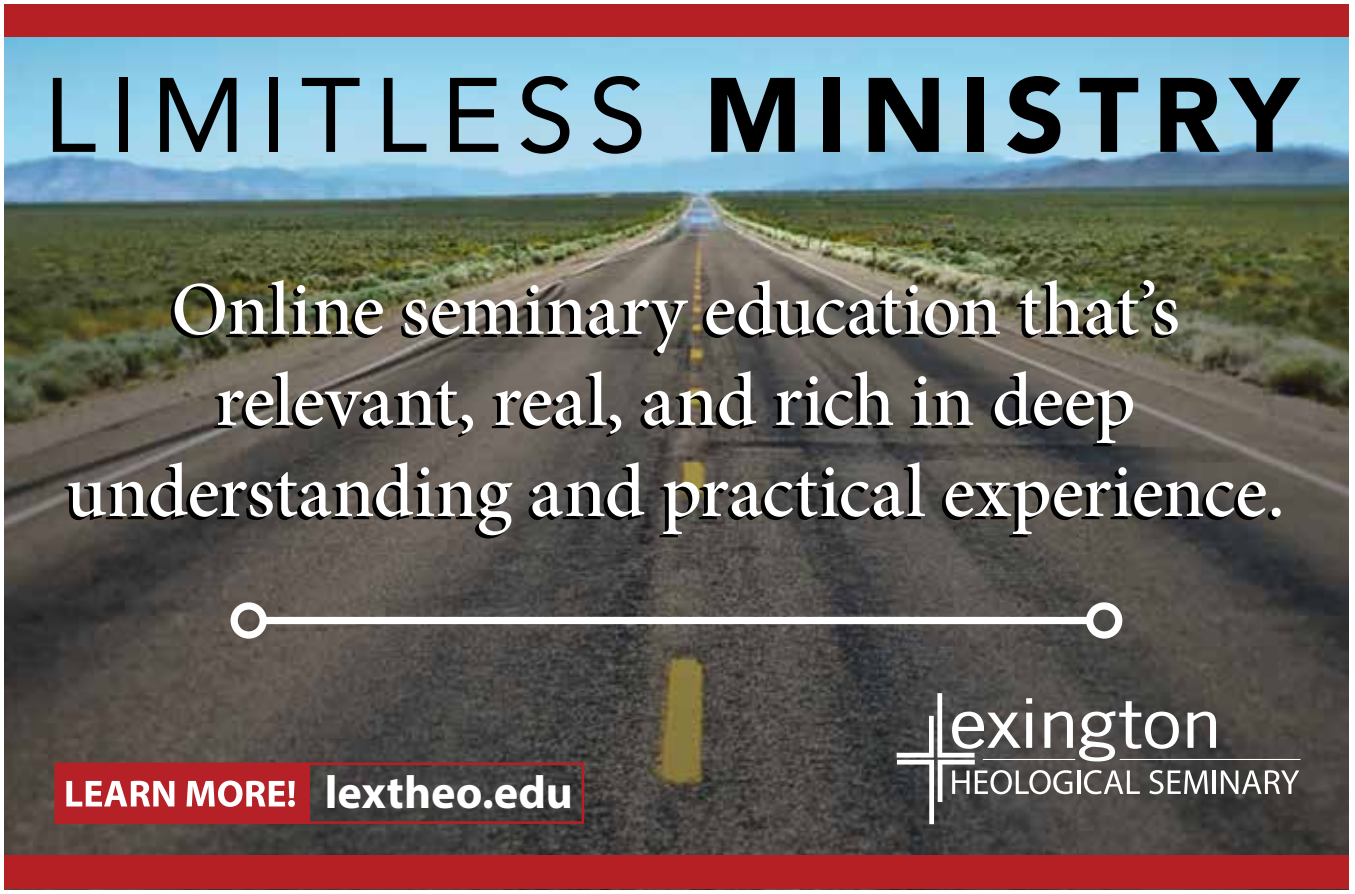
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COMMENTARY

BY CLAIRE LORENTZEN

THE FIERCE URGENCY OF GEN Z

In an age of instant experience, why does social change take so long?

I can name Emma's favorite foods: roasted sweet potatoes and acai smoothie bowls. I've spent hours with her two sisters and classmates. We've traveled across the country together and danced to all her most-loved songs.

Week after week, with one tap on my screen, I instantly enter Emma's world. As we laugh and smile at each other, it feels as if I am spending time with a friend, albeit a virtual one.

Emma Abrahamson is one of the countless Generation Z video bloggers on YouTube (some with tens of millions of followers) who are re-creating the nature of human friendship and experience.

The next presidential election will include a wave of Gen Zers voting for the first time. Who are they? What do they care about?

Beginning with those born in 1995, the same year as the commercial internet, Gen Zers only know a life of navigating multiple realities. While

Illustration by Michael George Haddad

I (a millennial) am part of the generation shaped by the arrival of instant communication, Gen Z is the generation shaped by the arrival of instant *experience*. They are constantly living on the cusp of the virtual and the physical—and, just like Emma, draw the rest of us in.

Some worry that such a technology-centered existence, filled with YouTube friends and instantaneous everything, leaves young people isolated and ill-equipped to live with uncertainty. Researchers claim it is leading to the highest rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide ever recorded. With a third of 18- to 24-year-olds stating they do not believe in God, further questions are emerging about how technology is influencing a generation even more disconnected from spirituality and religion than their millennial predecessors.

Surprisingly, the tech-centered life is also giving way to the most inclusive and diverse American generation yet. As I've walked through high school hallways and listened to students share their values and beliefs, it's clear that Gen Zers embrace their differences. They crave individuality, acceptance, dialogue, and engagement. By many indications, they are less self-centered than my millennial peers, and might prove to be more politically active.

With the first large cohort of Gen Zers becoming eligible to vote with the 2020 election, they bring their new multilayered realities with them to reimagining the "real" world—filling our political spheres with both their inclusion and impatience.

Accustomed to immediacy—and with an alleged average attention span of eight seconds—Gen Zers are asking why social and economic changes can't also take place instantly. If I can post a video and get 200,000 likes across the globe in a matter of minutes, why can't we all work together to rapidly stop climate change?

We've seen the fierce urgency of Gen Zers in the streets as they rally to stop gun violence and reverse climate change. Their other pressing concerns are erasing student debt, Medicare for all, and ensuring equality across identities—race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic status.

Gen Zers are inviting us to re-envision what is possible and what could be "real."

When I first clicked on Emma, I never thought that two years later I'd be calling her a friend. Perhaps that's possible. Instead of change being slow and gradual, with Emma it can be quick and radical.

* * *

"GEN Z MAY BE MORE POLITICALLY ACTIVE THAN PREVIOUS COHORTS."

Eighty percent of college students claim they are going to vote in the 2020 election. One third of their age cohort are choosing not to align with any political party. Instead, they are ready to vote for those who most support their priorities, and who will act—and quickly!

Claire Lorentzen is director of mission engagement for Schools of the Sacred Heart.

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—Rev. Dr. Diane Mowrey

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COMMENTARY BY DON V. VILLAR

STRONG SCHOOLS NEED STRONG UNIONS

Every day, school teachers and staff see the suffering of their students. In Chicago, they acted.

Before sunrise, the Chicago Federation of Labor team hit the city streets in an SUV packed with fresh donuts and hot coffee. We were bringing encouragement to picketing Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) Local 1 and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73 members. A cold front swept through on the first day of the Chicago public schools strike, which launched tens of thousands of public school teachers and school support staff into the streets in October, but it could not chill the fire for justice in the union members. They wanted something better not just for themselves but for the children they taught and cared for and the communities they came from.

Our first stop was Pulaski International School in Logan Square, home to nearly 900 students. The teachers and support staff were already on the sidewalks—wearing red for CTU and purple for SEIU 73. The teachers and staff at Pulaski identified class sizes and more prep time as key challenges.

We drove south to East Garfield Park, stopping at Westinghouse and Marshall high schools. Several NBA and NFL stars and other notable Chicagoans graduated from these schools. Sadly, during the strike, gunfire claimed the life of a Marshall student. Teachers and staff said more counselors and nurses were needed. Cardenas and Castellanos elementary schools also needed counselors. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids have traumatized many of the children, who have seen relatives and classmates disappear.

One of the last schools we visited was Ida B. Wells Elementary in Bronzeville, where poverty is the school's biggest challenge. Dozens of students showed up at the closed school because they had nowhere else to go and nothing to eat.

The school strike was a return of a national strike wave—a renewed labor activism by teachers—that started in 2012 in Chicago when CTU struck for the first time in more than two decades. That strike led to a series of major teacher walkouts across the country, including West Virginia and Oklahoma, as well as Los Angeles and Denver. The Chicago strike was historic because the Chicago public schools' two largest unions (CTU and SEIU 73) for the first time walked out together. SEIU 73, which represents the school support staff, includes some of the school district's lowest-paid workers.

While a pay raise was important, the strike was also about improving the lives of school children. Learning is difficult when children are preoccupied with hunger, trauma, and other stresses. Catholic social teaching emphasizes the importance for families having the resources to nurture and support themselves and their children, and that we are all connected. When we see our neighbors cold, hungry, and suffering, we are taught not to turn a blind eye to that suffering, but to make a difference. Every day, teachers and school support staff see the suffering of their students. Instead of ignoring it, they made it part of their fight.

On the picket lines, the unions carried on the mission of the labor movement as a force to lift struggling, working families and, in the end, secured an agreement from the city that includes a pay raise for teachers, a funded mandate to enforce class size limits, and a commitment to put nurses and social workers in schools by 2023.

One thing is clear: The more-than-500 Chicago public schools are the ties that bind neighborhoods and communities together into one big city. By improving the lives and working conditions of union members in the schools, the lives of the children and their families can be improved. When the lives of struggling families are improved, Chicago moves closer to becoming a more just and equitable city. ⊗

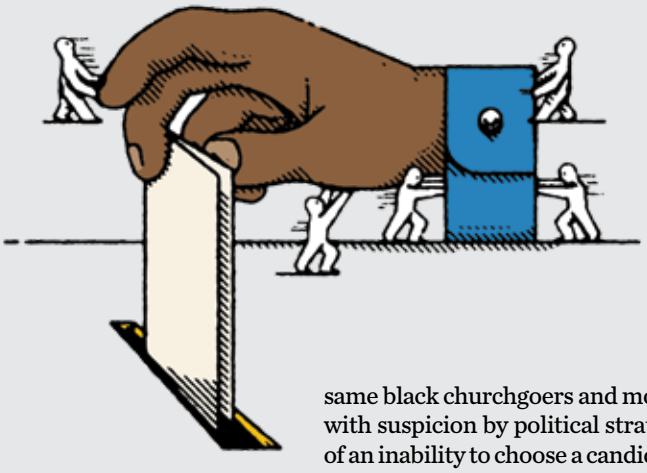
Don V. Villar is secretary-treasurer of the Chicago Federation of Labor and a member of Old St. Patrick's parish in Chicago.

Illustration by Michael George Haddad

COMMENTARY

BY DA'SHAWN MOSLEY

LET BLACK VOTERS BE BLACK VOTERS



From the South Carolina Democratic primary onward, the votes for the presidency cast by black churchgoers will be criticized by many white people. Even now, black churchgoers' feelings are speculated about in the press, like in-progress crimes announced on a police scanner.

Media and election pundits ask: "Are they going to choose Joe Biden because of his relationship with Barack Obama? Are they going to go for Elizabeth Warren because of her plan to give $50 billion to historically black colleges and universities and other minority-serving institutions? Are they going to bypass Pete Buttigieg because he's gay?"

The latter question is the most problematic—an attempt to deem all black churchgoers as homophobic, as if homophobia is something no other racial, ethnic, or religious group has played a part in; as if there's no such thing as the black grandfather who accepts his gay grandson; the black grandmother who always asks how her grandson's boyfriend is doing; or the black grandmother who puts on her "good wig" to hang out with said boyfriend when he visits the South. All three are my Christian grandparents, and they're not alone.

But the most problematic aspect of the Buttigieg question is what it reveals about white sight: Black churchgoers of the electorate are seen as tools to bring about a desired election result, and scapegoats if the election doesn't go the white way.

A little more than two years ago, black voters in Alabama were praised by pundits for electing Doug Jones to the U.S. Senate over Roy Moore, who faced allegations of child molestation and other sexual assaults. Jones toured black churches in the state, which likely helped him win. Now, ahead of the 2020 presidential election, those same black churchgoers and more in the South are eyed with suspicion by political strategists who accuse them of an inability to choose a candidate based on a platform.

The truth is, black churchgoers of the electorate can vote any way they like, and many white people will still find a way to abstract them as unintelligent animals. Even if black churchgoers help elect the first gay president of the United States, they will eventually be hit with another accusation. "They didn't vote for X because they don't understand foreign policy. They didn't vote for Y because they don't know economics. They didn't vote for Z because they believe women should submit to their husbands."

It's no different than the debunked "science" of phrenology that said Africans were dumb because of the shape of their skulls. "Depend upon it my good friend," Dr. Charles Caldwell wrote in 1837, "the Africans must have a master."

Black churchgoers of the electorate: Vote how you want, what feels right. After all, you have always possessed a stronger moral vision than many of your white counterparts. Before there were abolitionists, there were your ancestors, who said to themselves as they slaved on plantations: "This is immoral." Their descendants said the same during the civil rights movement. All have gathered in churches made from shanties or—once blown up by the Klan—piles of rubble that resembled shanties. All sang and sobbed, praised and mourned, and tapped into a level of the Spirit many white Christians don't even know exists.

That's the sort of wisdom I'd rather put my trust in. ⊗

* * *

"IT'S NO DIFFERENT THAN THE DEBUNKED 'SCIENCE' OF PHRENOLOGY."

Da'Shawn Mosley is assistant editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

Illustration by Michael George Haddad

DEEP ECONOMY

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

THE MOST DANGEROUS BUILDING IN TOWN

3

What's the most generic, uninteresting building in your town? Probably the new bank branch, all brown brick with sterile "landscaping" in the parking lot.

And what's the most dangerous building in your town? Probably the new bank branch, with its drive-through window and its smiling teller and its pens on chains.

Dangerous because if it's connected to one of the big national banks—Chase, Citi, Wells Fargo, Bank of America—that branch is deeply enmeshed in the destruction of God's creation that climate change represents. It's taking your money and turning it into carbon.

Those four banks—the same ones that helped nearly bring down the world economy in 2008—are the main lenders to the fossil fuel industry. If you want to build a new gas pipeline, if you wish to frack a well, if you hope for a shiny new LNG port, all you have to do is apply and chances are you'll get your cash. Consider Chase, which lends more than any bank on Earth to the fossil fuel industry. In the last three years it handed

* * *

"THAT BANK ON THE CORNER? IT'S TAKING YOUR MONEY AND TURNING IT INTO CARBON."

Illustration by Matt Chase

the industry $196 billion. For ultra-deep-sea drilling, for Arctic exploration—you name it. It's single biggest energy client? TC Energy, which is still trying to punch the Keystone XL pipeline across the continent. Its lending has gone up—way, way up—since the Paris climate accords. If Exxon is a carbon giant, so is Chase.

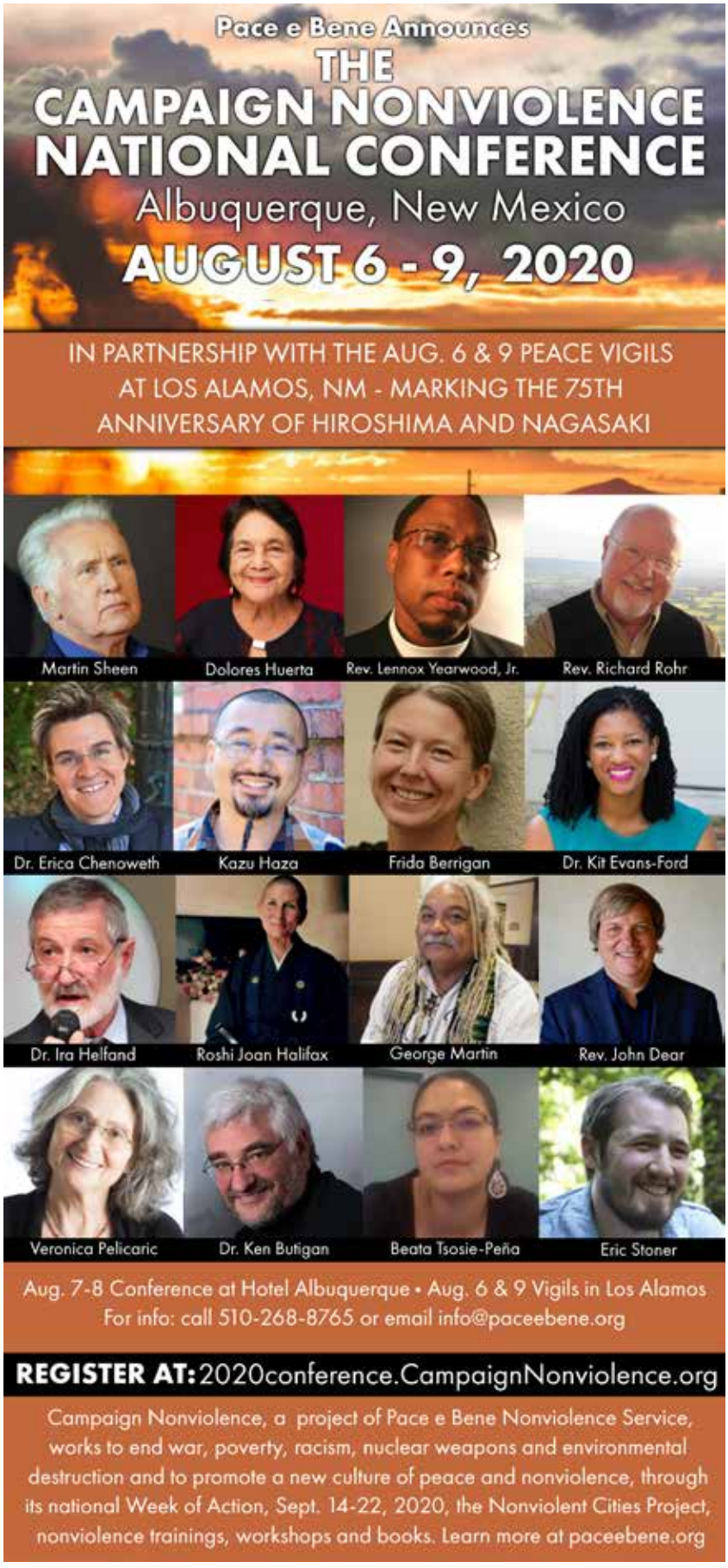
The rest of the banks aren't far behind, nor is the rest of the finance industry. Big asset managers such as Blackrock own most of the world's coal and gas and oil; big insurance companies such as Liberty Mutual not only pour your premium dollars into fossil fuel stocks, they also offer the insurance that lets these companies keep building new infrastructure (even as they abandon homeowners who now find themselves living amid drought-fueled wildfire zones or on the edge of a rising sea).

As the pope has been saying, we need to count abuse of the planet as a sin. We all have something to answer for, but few of us come close to these guys. You can almost even feel sorry for Exxon—they fight for their survival, since they only know how to do one thing. But Chase—Chase could lend to anybody. Oil and gas and coal are just a corner of their business. (Before you start to feel too sad for Exxon, however, reflect that their former CEO, Lee Raymond, has for many years been on Chase's board—this is a cozy and connected little chamber of horrors.)

Can we do anything about this? We can. We can fight. On April 23, people will be holding teach-ins in Chase branches across America. People will be pulling out their money and cutting up their credit cards. People will be saying "not with my money" and switching their accounts to local credit unions or to the handful of banks that have taken this crisis seriously. People will be trying to shut down *the worst pipeline of all, the pipeline of money.*

Will you be there? Perhaps you've admired all the young climate strikers around the world, who have done so much to awaken the planet's consciousness. Admire them you should—but it's not okay to take the world's biggest problem and hand it off to junior high students. Time to be an adult. ⊗

Bill McKibben, founder of 350.org, is the author most recently of *Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out?*



SOUL WORK BY CAROLINA HINOJOSA-CISNEROS

HANDS-ON SPIRITUALTY

I sat down with a co-worker to talk about presence and how to make God manifest in seasons that task us with injury, depression, and even death. Seasons of impeachment hearings, 700 missing women from ICE custody, and children still detained at detention facilities begin to create sinkholes in our spirits. My co-worker likened these experiences to a leaf floating on the waters of a raging river. The leaf is carried by the current without real direction, yet the leaf endures. A season of raging rivers has taken a toll on my faith, has created holes in the fabric of my believing. Every day I ask, where is God in this?

* * *

"IT'S BEEN A DEEP PRAYER TO SCULPT PAPER TO TELL A STORY ABOUT THE INNER PARTS OF MYSELF."

For the last couple months, I have found it hard to articulate my feeling of suspended belief. As a poet, a writer, a lover of words, there is a tension with sharing that information in words. I've begun to explore other media for translating these feelings. In November, I taught myself to sculpt paper. I'm not the best at it, because I'm tempted to create words to explain these images, but I need to let the image do most of the work. There is a beauty in doubt, a beauty that makes God manifest through our hands when we can't articulate it with our voices or our words.

What do I look like inside, in wavering belief? Where do I find God in this? God finds me working meticulously into the morning, at a loss for words, but with an X-Acto knife cutting intricate curves and penetrating delicate layers of paper to make manifest the interior of myself. It's been a deep prayer to sculpt paper in a manner that tells a story about the inner parts of myself where I find the Holy Spirit most alive, waiting for me to come back to myself.

As we begin to settle into the new year, my hope is that while the issues of our world continue to challenge us to think in more strategic ways to propel justice forward, that we don't forget to create. For some of us, creativity is not something we readily engage, yet making something is not out of the scope of possibility. How do we prepare ourselves to be the leaf in raging waters when the allure of the new year wears off? While writing our resolutions, we shouldn't forget to ask ourselves where God is in all of this, and keep creating. God is made manifest at the core of where we come back to ourselves. ⊗

Carolina Hinojosa-Cisneros is a Tejana, Chicana, and Mujerista from San Antonio, Texas, where she is a graduate student at Our Lady of the Lake University. She is the 2019 Recipient of the Rubem Alves Award in Theopoetics.

Illustration by Matt Chase

UNDER THE SUN

BY JEANIA REE V. MOORE

NIGHT AT THE MUSEUM

To enter the main history galleries of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), you have to descend. A glass elevator carries you down through six centuries of history, dates written on walls like exposed strata in the earth. The past, we are reminded, lies not behind us but beneath us.

The weight of your passage and what lies ahead does not hit you until you step out of the elevator and emerge to the 1400s. You have arrived in a trans-Atlantic world as yet unmade, a geography not yet drawn by greed, suffering, and death. You will return to the surface and the present slowly, and only by walking the mile-and-a-half-long exhibition corridor on a winding route through slavery to an unsecured freedom.

No matter how many times I take this journey, it never becomes familiar.

The emotional shock of history is too great, contained in the thousands of everyday items on display: tiny, child-sized shackles; pieces of an excavated slave ship; an entire slave cabin, transplanted from South Carolina; a small silver box that held one man's treasured possession, his free papers; Harriet Tubman's lace shawl, given to her by Queen Victoria. Emmett Till's casket.

NMAAHC, or the "Blacksonian," as I like to call it, makes explicit what is sometimes only gestured to by other institutions: the sacredness of history.

On the summer solstice last year, I gained a deeper understanding of the sacred within history. The Smithsonian museums celebrated the longest day of the year with special programming and extended hours, some until midnight. At NMAAHC, I left the promising party upstairs—it was night at the black museum—to descend to the historical galleries. While there, I was arrested by the captions accompanying a display on picking cotton, featuring a field whip that a slave owner used to terrorize and torture enslaved black people into increasing production. Among the multitude of overwhelming facts I read (for example, lashings sometimes resulted in brain damage) was one on the human cost of increased cotton production: "Unable to leave small infants behind, mothers strapped babies to their backs or left them nearby in the field. One in four children did not survive their first year."

Reading that sentence, I realized that this historical reality is embedded in my DNA, as a descendant of children who did survive.

The past lies not just beneath us, but within us.

When I returned to the surface and the present, I emerged to a full-blown party in the main hall, complete with everyone doing the electric slide to Beyoncé's cover of "Before I Let Go." Classic, unadulterated black joy, a few floors up from Emmett Till's casket, literally on top of slave ships and whips and things that were meant to—and did—kill us.

This is the sacredness of history at NMAAHC, embedded in the earth and enfleshed in us.

Slavery conditions our very possibility—and we dance on its grave.

* * *

"THE 'BLACKSONIAN' MAKES EXPLICIT WHAT IS SOMETIMES ONLY GESTURED TO BY OTHER INSTITUTIONS: THE SACREDNESS OF HISTORY."

Jeania Ree V. Moore is a United Methodist deacon who writes theological aesthetics, practices the arts, and works in faith-based social justice in Washington, D.C.

Illustration by Matt Chase

EYEWITNESS

4

* * *

"HOW MANY TIMES CAN YOU WRITE A SCATHING STATEMENT?"

Activists outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., in 2019 / Olivier Douliery / AFP via Getty Image

WELCOMING REFUGEES REQUIRES MORE THAN WORDS

"We'd never organized civil disobedience around refugee resettlement before—we've never really had to. Refugee resettlement has always had bipartisan support.

But when there was news the administration would again be cutting the refugee resettlement number, a lot of folks—especially from religious communities—felt we had to respond in a way that was different from what we had done before. I mean, how many times can you write a scathing statement expressing outrage, right?

We had 18 people arrested wearing life jackets to symbolize that only 18,000 refugees will be able to find safety in the United States this year. And they were surrounded by 95 people holding pictures of refugees to symbolize the 95,000 refugees who the U.S. has traditionally pledged to welcome.

We also joined a lawsuit challenging the executive order President Trump signed requiring states and localities to provide written consent for refugees to be resettled in their community. We strongly believe local officials should be part of the process of welcoming refugees, but we don't believe a governor or county official should have veto authority over who lives in their state or city. We have never sued the federal government before. We debated the pros and cons of being involved, but we decided in the end that *not* to be part of the lawsuit would really be a sin of omission."

Jen Smyers is director of policy and advocacy for the immigration and refugee program of Church World Service (CWS). She spoke with *Sojourners* associate editor Betsy Shirley about CWS' recent work.

Photo composites by Matt Chase

POISON TO BODY AND SOUL

PLASTICS ARE VERSATILE AND CONVENIENT—AND KILLING US, PHYSICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY. RECLAIMING LIFE IN A DISPOSABLE CULTURE.

By Sasha Adkins

Somehow, the cultural narrative around plastics has collapsed into a story of unfortunate sea creatures with their little bellies full of plastic. As an only child who grew up living aboard a sailboat, these sea creatures are my family and the ocean is my home. I devoted my dissertation research to studying how some types of plastic marine debris concentrate methyl mercury. I crewed on a short research trip to Baja California with Capt. Charles Moore of the Algalita Marine Research Foundation, who was the first to bring attention to the Pacific "garbage patch." I helped dissect a juvenile black-footed albatross and counted the bits of plastic in its majestic body.

I, too, feel the urgency to keep plastics out of the oceans at all costs, but I fear that there is another story that is not being told.

Disposable plastic is toxic not only to the body but also to the soul. The more we normalize short-term utility as the main criterion for evaluating the things around us, the more disconnected we become from a sense of the inherent worth of creation. The more we cultivate this habit of the heart of seeing things as disposable once they no longer serve us, the less able we are to find the beauty and value in our relationships with each other, or even the intrinsic value in ourselves once we are no longer "productive."

Plastic's circular economy

When we ask, "Does this spark joy?" what if we also ask whether it "sparks joy" for the workers who make it?

Certain diseases are found almost exclusively in workers involved in the production of vinyl (polyvinyl chloride, or PVC). One is angiosarcoma (cancer) of the liver. Another is occupational acroosteolysis, a painful condition in which the bones in the fingertips break down and the minerals are reabsorbed. Thus, in a sad twist of irony, these workers are more likely to need the PVC IV tubing, PVC catheters, and PVC feeding tubes that they helped create, and they are more likely to spend time confined in hospitals, staring at vinyl walls and vinyl floors and vinyl windows.

Industry spokespeople reassure us that the levels that workers are exposed to today are much lower than they were when these links were established, but I am not sure that is true in China or in other emerging economies where much of our plastic originates.

The building blocks of PVC are derived from oil or gas. In another strange twist, tiny particles of plastic and plastic-coated sand are often used in the fracking process for extracting natural gas, some of which will then become more plastic. This is not what I mean when I advocate for a "circular economy."

Fracking is contentious. Each pound of conventional plastic costs 22 gallons of fresh water. The amount of water required in routine fracking operations, by some estimates, is up to 9.6 million gallons per well. That does not include spills or seepage into the water table that obligates local residents to drink from yet more plastic bottles.

Equally concerning is evidence that the glut of natural gas, touted as a "bridge fuel" to a clean energy future, may lock us into a plastic future. Fracked gas production surged more than fifteenfold from 2000 to 2018, according to recent research by Food and Water Watch. The glut of natural gas has driven prices to their lowest levels in decades. Three industries have stepped in to capitalize on the low gas prices: natural-gas-fired power plants, gas exporters, and petrochemical and plastics corporations. "Industry experts project that the plastics industry will have add-

The current recycling system conditions us to accept a disposable culture.

Today, the way we "keep America beautiful" is by sending our trash overseas.

ed 28 million tons of plastic production between 2011 and 2020, and more than $202 billion is slated to be invested in 333 new facilities and expansions to take advantage of fracked gas," according to "The Fracking Endgame," by Food and Water Watch.

Of course, many of these uses of water and fracked gas also produce air pollution, not to mention noise pollution and light pollution that lead migrating birds astray. Invisible to most of us as we hold a plastic bottle are the cancer-causing and hormone-disrupting chemicals that flow downstream from a frack and the grief of families experiencing miscarriages, birth defects, and infertility attributed to these exposures. Most of us do not see the tears of the bereaved families of workers suffocated by "sour gas" (hydrogen sulfide).

Is recycling a hoax?

I was led to believe that I could atone for all this by throwing my plastic into a blue bin when I was done with it. According to industry, if only we had better blue bin collection systems and more conscientious and "educated" consumers, we would not have to think about source reduction. That is a tempting idea, but is it true?

No. Recycling as it is practiced now does very little to decrease the production of new plastic. Even worse, the existence of the current recycling system conditions us to accept a disposable culture.

Japan claims to recycle up to 86 percent of its plastic, but that statistic includes so-called "thermal recycling." Also known as energy recovery and waste-to-energy, this just means that the heat energy produced by incinerating the trash is captured and reused. But where will the toxic ash and the spent smokestack filter end up?

One consistent feature of disposable culture is that it moves more and more poisons into the bodies of people who are socially vulnerable. This sort of analysis is what environmental justice activists have been doing at least since the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice published *Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States* in 1987. The situation was not much better in *Toxic Wastes and Race at Twenty* in 2007.

An environmental justice lens asks, "Who benefits from this action, and who is harmed (or who bears the risk of being harmed)?" What happens when we ask these questions about plastics recycling?

Who benefits from recycling? Plastics manufacturers.

Industry publicly frames the plastics problem as one of "mismanagement" of waste. I can't help but wonder, though, if the real problem for them is how to make us feel better about what we are doing to each other and to the planet. Plastics manufacturers need us to feel good—or at least neutral—about their products so we keep buying them. Enter "guilt-free packaging."

The "astroturf" group that since 1953 has been promoting pro-recycling and anti-litter "public service" messages is called Keep America Beautiful. Funded by the beverage and packaging industries (and cigarette manufacturer Philip Morris, whose single-use plastic filters are a significant pollutant), KAB fights hard against government regulations that would shift responsibility from consumers back to producers. Today, however, the way we "keep America beautiful" is by sending our trash overseas, in big shipping containers labeled "recycling."

The 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal is an international treaty among 186 countries and the European Union that regulates the export of toxic waste from wealthy to under-resourced countries. It was amended in May 2019 to specifically prohibit shipments of plastics for "recycling" to non-OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations. The U.S., however, has yet to ratify the Basel Convention and therefore is not a party to it.

Once the shipments are unpacked abroad, workers (often children) sort through it in search of the bits that can be resold. Given that it is usually less expensive for companies to use new plastic than recycled, there is not a good living to be had in these bales. What cannot be resold is often burned in smoldering, open-air piles.

The lower the temperature of the fire, the more toxic the substances created. State-of-the-art pyrolysis facilities maintain their burn at 1,100 degrees Celsius. Informal burn piles may only reach 600 to 1,000 degrees Celsius. At these temperatures, PVC readily forms dioxins.

To distance ourselves even further from all of this, we scapegoat. The American Council on Science and Health (which counts among its major donors the Koch and Scaife families, Exxon Mobil, and McDonald's) has published an article on plastics that reassures U.S. readers, "You aren't the problem. Asia is."

I don't want to Keep America Beautiful if that means burying other countries in our trash. I want to Keep the Whole Planet Beautiful. Recently, some waste haulers have pledged to keep our trash local, by which they mean confined to North America. Time will tell whether this is a move toward environmental justice or simply a change in the scenery around the brown and black people who will be sorting through my garbage.

Reducing waste at the source is obviously the ideal solution, yet even my community-supported agriculture farm share box (the waxed cardboard one that I reuse every week) sometimes arrives with loose greens in plastic bags. I want out of this system. But how?

How to invest in sustainable relationships

Back in 2012, I thought I had the answer. I moved to Dancing Rabbit Eco-Village, in the Missouri prairie, with the intention of living entirely without plastic. I thought I could build a cob or straw-bale tiny house and survive on unpackaged foods grown in our village and on surrounding farms.

Then it dawned on me. The plastic was still there, upstream. Just as the workers poisoned by the plastics they create were invisible to me, so was the plastic itself. When I picked up my bunches of loose greens and put them ever so sanctimoniously in my cloth bag, I didn't have to look at the sheets of polyethylene that covered the field to keep weeds in check or the polycarbonate panels that kept the greenhouse warm in winter so that I could eat extended-season vegetables.

I realized that opting myself out of the system was not enough. The whole system must change. And not just one plastic straw at a time.

Transforming disposable culture is not just a matter of substituting the latest bioplastic, compostable version of a throwaway item. It is about changing our cultural narratives so that our decisions are not based solely on what is convenient for ourselves but on what is life-giving for all of us. It is as much about investing in sustainable relationships, both at the interpersonal and international levels, as it is about sustainable packaging.

I experiment with culture-shifting in the classes I teach. I invite my students to pick up a piece of litter on their way to class, then take it home and put it in an honored place in their room. I ask them to contemplate the garbage until they are able to see its beauty. I challenge them to find a new purpose for it.

Of course, picking up one piece of litter won't change our cityscape. But it can transform us.

Some students find emotions surfacing that they were not expecting, such as a deep longing for reconciliation with estranged loved ones. If you are skeptical about the connection between throwing away a "to go" cup and throwing away a relationship, I urge you to try it for yourself.

I have adopted a spiritual practice of not using disposables when I can help it. Instead of thinking that I can separate myself from the symbolic and actual messiness, I strive to cultivate a habit of the heart of seeing God's creation as worth holding on to. Every time I pull out my stainless-steel camping plate, metal straw, bamboo cutlery, or metal water bottle, I remember that I am washed and made clean, too. There are so many ways throughout the day to silently thank God for not giving up on me, and for embodying not only second chances but 70 times 70 reuses.

Of course, it will never be complete. Personally, I draw the line at reusable wipes instead of toilet paper. You get to draw that line where it makes sense for you. I find that the act of *noticing* itself is a useful sort of mindfulness. Do I really *need* this? Where are my options constrained, and why? I also ask myself whose hands have touched the things that now serve me. Were they enriched or diminished by their encounter with this object? Will it make our common home more generative?

I want to see the world through God's eyes. All of this helps me remember that everything is sacred. I am not reducing my use of plastics only to safeguard my own health. This is also for the unfortunate sea creatures with their bellies full of plastic. It is for the Indigenous nations whose water is threatened by natural gas pipelines. It is for the vinyl chloride workers who can no longer feel their fingers. And it is for everyone who has ever been used. With every "convenience" I decline, I affirm our belovedness, our interdependence.

I refuse to be refuse. ⊗

Sasha Adkins, author of *From Disposable Culture to Disposable People: The Unintended Consequences of Plastics*, is a lecturer at the Institute of Environmental Sustainability at Loyola University in Chicago.

I realized that opting myself out of the system was not enough. The whole system must change.

HOLLYWOOD'S GOLDEN AGE OF RACISM

How early cinema nativism led an Asian American actor to success—and how the church helped crash his career.

by CHRIS KARNADI

Japanese-born actor Sessue Hayakawa thrived in the movie industry by playing into the structures of racism that set up his stardom.

Hayakawa in 1918

IN THE EARLY DAYS OF HOLLYWOOD

Japanese-born actor Sessue Hayakawa (1886-1973) was an icon. In the context of racist U.S. policy and increasing nativism in Hollywood, he was arguably the first non-Caucasian actor to gain international fame and the first person of Asian descent to become a leading man in the movie industry.

His overall career, however, is a story of race's shadowy relationship with success. Orientalism, Yellow Peril, and America's fear of Japan both helped and hurt his career. The Catholic Church's eventual oversight of Hollywood also played a part in his troubles. The only way Hayakawa thrived in the industry was by playing into the structures of racism that set up his stardom.

"Such roles are not true ..."

In 1915, with actress Fannie Ward, Hayakawa had the first on-screen interracial kiss.

Well before the Motion Picture Production Code outlawed interracial romance in 1930, the silent film *The Cheat* (1915) shows Edith Hardy (Ward) as a wife who takes money from the Red Cross, loses the $10,000, and then struggles to repay her debt. As she reels from the news of her loss in a semi-conscious state, an acquaintance, Hishuru Tori (Hayakawa), assaults her and steals a kiss before she comes to her senses.

The silent film continues as Hardy describes her debt to Tori. Tori writes a check from his exorbitant wealth—he is described by title cards as a Japanese ivory trader—but not for free. He expects something from Ward.

When Hardy goes to repay Tori after her husband makes a hefty return on an investment, Tori locks the door and assaults her a second time. He brands Hardy with a circular seal; after she falls to the ground, the camera focuses on the stark black mark on her white shoulder.

The branding scene caused uproar in the Japanese American community. A Japanese newspaper in Los Angeles denounced Hayakawa, his sinister character, and the character's appearance as a harmful stereotype. (Hayakawa reportedly had asked Cecil B. DeMille, the director of *The Cheat*, to change the clothing and mannerisms of his character, but DeMille disregarded him.) The backlash was enough for the film to be re-released in 1918 with Hayakawa's character changed to a "Burmese king," presumably because the studio believed Burmese people would have less volume to their voices of dissent.

"Such roles are not true to our Japanese nature ... They are false and give people a wrong idea of us," said Hayakawa in 1916. "I wish to make a characterization which shall reveal us as we really are."

But he failed to deliver on his wish. Hayakawa had won many fans with the role. Scholar Daisuke Miyao argues that Hayakawa's status as a "matinee idol" depended on women's obsession over him. Critic DeWitt Bodeen likened him to Rudolph Valentino and remarked that Hayakawa's appeal was even more "electric" and "involved fiercer tones of masochism as well as a latent female urge to experience sex with a beautiful but savage man of another race." After performing in *The Cheat* for Famous Players-Lasky Corporation—which later became Paramount Pictures—Hayakawa became internationally known, as much or more than Charlie Chaplin.

Hayakawa portrayed sexual violence and became a symbol. In the following two years working for Lasky, Hayakawa continued to play stereotypical characters—of Chinese, Indian, Mexican, and Native American origin.

"Birthright"

Hayakawa's characters fell into two main categories: They were people of color eager to forfeit their traditions to fit into an American lifestyle, or romantic characters who became heroes when they sacrificed themselves for white women and delivered them to their white husbands.

To understand the success of Hayakawa playing these roles, one must also understand the geopolitical background for Asians in America. Both the U.S. and Japan promoted narratives that separated the Japanese from other, "uncivilized" people. Japan was placed in the middle of a racial hierarchy, which placed Africans and African Americans at the bottom and white Europeans at the top.

However, as the tension between America

Sessue Hayakawa in *The Beggar Prince* / Getty Images

The paths to success Hayakawa took, and their pitfalls, are still present for Asian Americans and other people of color.

and Japan rose in the 1910s and 1920s, before and after World War I, so did anti-Asian xenophobia. Fear of the growing Japanese military power in the Pacific fed formal efforts to discriminate against Japanese people, especially on the West Coast. In Ozawa v. United States (1922), the U.S. Supreme Court decided that Takao Ozawa, a Japanese American who had been living in the U.S. for 20 years, could not become a citizen. The fascinating aspect of Ozawa v. United States is that the plaintiff was not challenging the racial categorization of the Naturalization Act of 1906, which said that only "free white person[s] ... of good character" were citizens. Rather, he was claiming that he qualified as a white person, and the court resoundingly said he did not.

Rather than a hindrance, this racial imagery was used by Lasky to promote Hayakawa into stardom. Hayakawa both assuaged fears of Japan and sated curiosity about the East. Following *The Cheat*, Lasky was careful to put Hayakawa in roles that would portray him as a good person who, although he helps to save white characters, never becomes equal to them.

Seeking to correct the racial trajectory of his career, Hayakawa became a director of a union of Japanese motion picture actors aimed at preventing anti-Japanese films. He also established his own production company—Haworth Pictures Corporation—with $1 million of his own money and aimed to create better representation with his own films. He finally had creative control over the roles and messages that his films would show, but over time the racist motifs he played to gain international fame were too difficult for him to shed.

The first film released at Haworth was *His Birthright* (1918). Hayakawa plays a biracial man named Yukio born to an American man and a Japanese woman. The father is a U.S. naval officer who is stationed in Japan but leaves at Yukio's birth, and the mother commits suicide because of the father's desertion. Without parents, Yukio is portrayed as unintelligent and barbarous. He struggles to count and dances goofily to an African American orchestra. In the climax of the film, he attacks a white woman who is a German spy, inadvertently saving the day. At the movie's close, he hears more music, this time from a U.S. Navy band, and marches to the tune, referencing his movement from "barbarity" with the African American orchestra to the "civility" of the U.S. military.

Hayakawa wrote the film, but the plot uses the similar racist messaging as his previous work. The militarism echoes war propaganda, and the movie's sexual violence is reminiscent of *The Cheat*. Hayakawa had established his own production company only to portray an Asian person appealing to become white by distancing himself from African Americans. His production company reportedly was worth $2 million in 1920, making the venture worth his investment. He was still subject to the racial hierarchy, and it paid off.

The bridge is sabotaged

Eventually, however, racism did crash Hayakawa's career. Film scholar Miyao argues that Hayakawa's stardom peaked in 1919, and then started to decline because of post-war nativism and the formalization of Hollywood. Fear of Japan's rising power during World War I caused suspicion of Hayakawa.

In 1922, studios established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America and appointed Presbyterian Will Hays as its chair, among calls from religious groups to clean up Hollywood and its movies. Under Hays, the MPPDA began to establish laws of censorship for films. In 1930, their efforts resulted in the Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC), which outlined moral guidelines for films, including the outlawing of nudity, white slavery, and interracial romance. The codes, however, were largely ignored during the initial

Sessue Hayakawa in *Daughter of the Dragon* and *Tokio Joe* / Getty Images

years of the Great Depression, because sex and violence sell.

In 1933, the Catholic Church created the Legion of Decency, an organization dedicated to enforcing the MPPC and aggressively pushing Catholics across the nation to avoid films it condemned. The Legion screened scripts, scenes, and wardrobe, threatening films with potential bad ratings and Catholic boycotts, to great effect. From 1934 to 1954, every Hollywood film that made it to theaters was approved under the MPCC.

For Hayakawa, the ban on implied or explicit interracial romance meant romantic roles in the U.S. disappeared. For the rest of his career, he primarily acted in films in France and Japan. Like many of his characters, Hayakawa had hit the limits of his Americanization.

Hayakawa's most famous and lasting performance came in the late 1950s: his Oscar-nominated role in *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). The film opens with captured British prisoners, led by Colonel Nicholson (Alec Guinness), filing into a Japanese camp in Burma. The prisoners of war are tasked with building a bridge to connect a train route between Bangkok and Rangoon.

Hayakawa plays Saito, the Japanese colonel in charge of the camp. Saito tells of attending school in London for engineering. He's judged as savage by the other prisoners, but Nicholson believes he is capable of being "civilized" and just needs some coaxing from the British.

As the British colonel commits to introducing "civilization" to the camp, Saito eventually cooperates with him and follows his direction in the construction of the bridge. The bridge, however, is eventually sabotaged as Saito is killed by a group of commandos. As the train hurtles across the bridge, Nicholson regrets committing his men to constructing the bridge and blows it up as he dies.

The paths to success Hayakawa took, and their pitfalls, are still present for Asian Americans and other people of color. In the intersection between racism and capitalism, "success" is always ambiguous, because racism pays.

Facedown

In October 2019, Tyler Perry became the first black person to own a major production studio. His complex in Atlanta—330 acres—is an accomplishment in and of itself, but Perry's success did not come without criticism, especially for his characterization of black women. Critic Jamilah Lemieux once cautioned Perry in an open letter about the consequences of using "old stereotypes of buffoonish, emasculated black men and crass, sassy black women," while she also acknowledged that in 2009 he was the "only person who seems to be able to get black shows on TV." Perry can certainly be criticized for caricature, homophobia, and transphobia, but he has been successful and important in the history of black cinema.

The Hays Code was largely ignored during the initial years of the Great Depression, because sex and violence sell.

Perry's success, in many ways, parallels Hayakawa's, not least because they were the first of their race to own a Hollywood production studio. Their accomplishments can be celebrated simply because they were improbable. In the face of racism, they both somehow carved out spaces for themselves. But their success came at great cost.

Just like Takao Ozawa, the plaintiff in the Supreme Court case, Hayakawa placed a stake in whiteness but could never become white. The same temptation exists for Asian Americans today. One need only look at the Harvard affirmative action case, or the rise of the Chinese American Right in support of President Trump, as evidence of both colorism and a lack of intersectional solidarity with other people of color.

At the end of *The Bridge on the River Kwai,* Saito dies facedown in the muddy riverbank. Hayakawa compromised and collaborated with white actors and directors throughout his life, but he was, at the end of the day, still a Japanese man in America and is largely forgotten today. Flirting with racism may help your career but, eventually, it leaves you for dead. ⊗

Chris Karnadi is an assistant editor of Duke Divinity's Faith and Leadership and a *Sojourners* columnist.

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SOJOURNERS

As people of God, Christian anarchists feel called to dismantle oppressive systems and create radical alternatives.

by **BETSY SHIRLEY**

Illustration by Matt Chase

Ben Wildflower is a self-described "high-church lowlife." He lives in Kensington, a Philadelphia neighborhood that's also home to intravenous drug users and sex workers. Wildflower—the surname he and his wife adopted after their marriage—is white, bearded, and male; he grew up among conservative evangelicals but now attends an Episcopal church ("a wonderful, welcoming space for so many people alienated by the church," he said, "but also a bizarre, bourgeois institution"). Sometimes he fixes his roommates' bikes to cover rent; he aims to live on very little.

I came across Wildflower through his handmade religious prints that resemble the black-and-white woodcuts found in *The Catholic Worker*, albeit with a little more attitude: "O Mary conceived without white supremacy," reads one of Wildflower's prints featuring the Holy Mother using aerosol flamethrowers to destroy Confederate and Nazi symbols, "pray for us trying to dismantle this shit."

Wildflower doesn't love the word "anarchist" because it sounds too self-assured ("like how a super-duper Reformed person has answers for everything") and often evokes scenes of white dudes eager to break stuff and punch cops. But he sticks with it: "I'm an anarchist because I oppose hierarchical power structures," said Wildflower. "You apply it to sex and gender, you have 'feminism.' You apply it to white supremacy and racism, and you have 'anti-racism.' So what is it when you apply it to the modern state? I guess we don't have a word better than 'anarchism.'"

Does it bring joy?

In the past four years, it's been tempting to believe the main problem with U.S. democracy is the current occupant of the White House and the electoral politics that paved his way to office. But Christian anarchists offer a different perspective.

"The thought of America crumbling should bring you joy," Wildflower told me in an interview last spring. As Christian anarchists see it, the problems that exist in our nation—poverty, white supremacy, militarism, economic inequality, and on down the list—are not aberrations in an otherwise good system, but rather inescapable outcomes of any system where some people have been put in power over others. And as people of God, Christian anarchists feel called to dismantle these oppressive systems and create radical alternatives.

Take prisons: "I think people are valuable and shouldn't be warehoused in cages," said Wildflower. "I don't think [prison] changes people; I don't think it makes us safer; I think it's a tool to control and impoverish communities of color. I want it to be destroyed." Though he participates in what he calls "reformist" actions, such as voting for a better district attorney or advocating to change sentencing laws—something his younger anarchist self would have scoffed at, but that he felt was important after listening to women and people of color in his community—he doesn't feel those actions will ever fix the underlying problem. "A system that holds people accountable for injustices looks so unimaginably different than the prison system, that I'm still totally on the 'burn it down' side."

Hearing talk about burning and destruction makes me anxious, even though I know Wildflower isn't advocating violence (a violent revolution "hurts the already-poor and the already-oppressed more than the already-rich," he told me later). It's not that I don't see the structural problems he identifies (I do), nor that I want to preserve the status quo (I don't). But I'm still skeptical: Even if we *could* nonviolently dismantle something like the U.S. penal system, how do we know the new thing built in its place would be free of the problems we're already facing? Shouldn't we just keep working—Organize! Advocate! Speak truth to power!—to fix what we already have?

"The fact is, the Exodus is good news for God's people and it's really bad news for Pharaoh and his people," Wildflower told me when I shared my skepticism. "When we're scared to hear 'Well, what about a world with no prisons?' who is that scariest to? It's scarier to the white community than it is to the black community. It's scarier to rich people than poor people." And if talking about anarchism makes me—a white woman with a job, health insurance, and shoes I bought via Instagram—anxious, maybe Wildflower has a point.

Down with chaos

"Good luck," a colleague told me as I shoved a carton of milk into the staff fridge. "It's anarchy in there."

In most conversations, *anarchy* means lawlessness, chaos, and stubborn resistance to organization. As a political ideology, however, *anarchism* isn't "burn it all down and anything goes." Yes, anarchists seek to end the state, along with white

Christian anarchists see the church's reluctance to think beyond current political systems as a failure of Christian imagination.

supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, nationalism, and any other -ism that puts some people in control over others.

But the anarchist ideal has never been to replace oppressive structures with an amorphous free-for-all. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, in 1840, was the first to declare, "I am an anarchist"; he described himself in the same breath as "a firm friend of order." In the 1800s, European anarchist thinkers such as Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and Peter Kropotkin envisioned replacing the centralized state with tidy, egalitarian societies where workers would opt-in to self-governed, mutually beneficial cooperatives. To achieve these ends, they called not for a top-down revolution, but a bottom-up movement of the people to liberate themselves by creating something better.

These values—autonomy, anti-authoritarianism, egalitarian relationships, and mutual aid—still echo through contemporary anarchist practice: During the 2011 Occupy Wall Street encampment, anarchists (and other participants) practiced decision making through direct democracy rather than electing leaders. Anarchists have filled neglected potholes, distributed free bikes, aided each other in farming cooperatives, outfitted abandoned buildings as refugee accommodations, and turned unsold food into free vegetarian meals.

That said, rejecting authority makes anarchists ideologically diverse. Some anarchists practice nonviolence; others—like the anarchists and anti-fascists who smashed windows on the day of Donald Trump's inauguration—don't. There are anarcho-primitivists (who want to return to a hunter-gatherer society), eco-anarchists (who emphasize the liberation of human and nonhuman animals), "anarcho-capitalists" (whose extreme free-market libertarianism is rejected by most other anarchists), and, to the surprise of many, Christian anarchists.

Jesus anarchists

The anarchist thinkers of the 1800s deeply influenced a number of European and American Christians—including Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker co-founder, Peter Maurin, as well as Leo Tolstoy, Ammon Hennacy, Jacques Ellul, and Vernard Eller. For these Christians, anarchism deeply resonated with Jesus' own challenge to the political forces of his day—and sharply contrasted the cozy church-state relationship Christians had often enjoyed. In his 2011 study, Alexandre Christoyannopoulos defined Christian anarchism as a belief that "Jesus' teaching implies a critique of the state, and an honest and consistent application of Christianity would lead to a stateless society."

What would this look like? Many Christian anarchists point to the witness of dissident Christian movements throughout church history: the Jerusalem church's common-purse practices described in Acts, the Beguines' and Beghard's egalitarian communities of the late Middle Ages, early Anabaptists' indifference to secular government, the common land experiment of the Diggers in the 17th century, and the consensus-seeking Quakers. Though these movements didn't think of themselves as anarchists, they exhibited what Mark Van Steenwyk describes in *That Holy Anarchist* as an "anarchic impulse" that "emerges and re-emerges" throughout the various branches of the Christian tradition.

The most enduring expression of Christian anarchism is the Catholic Worker and its 203 communities that offer hospitality to the homeless. Its members—who are all considered equal volunteers—still reject capitalism, militarism, and the "bigness of government," and instead encourage a decentralized society of "family farms, rural and urban land trusts, worker ownership and management of small factories, homesteading projects, food, housing, and other cooperatives." When asked about her anarchist beliefs in a 1970s interview, Dorothy Day cited Kropotkin's belief in bottom-up societal change: "You do away with banks by credit unions, you do away with interest by mutual aid, you do away with possession of goods by sharing. Unions, credit unions, farming communes, cooperatives, all these things," said Day, are part of "the nonviolent anarchist point of view."

According to Van Steenwyk, co-founder of the Mennonite Worker in Minneapolis, other examples of contemporary Christian anarchism tend to bubble up from folks within the Anabaptist tradition, intentional communities with evangelical-ish roots, and people "engaging politics on the Far Left who are also engaging Christianity." But in the past decade, he explained, a lot of the Christian anarchist movement has "gotten absorbed into the larger anti-authoritarian Left."

"There's this suspicion that after Trump goes away, the Christian Left will go back to the way it was before and Christian anarchists will still be here, pushing the Far Left edge," he said.

Beyond the state

Nekeisha Alayna Alexis also identifies as a Christian anarchist. Born in Trinidad and raised Catholic, Alexis and her family drifted toward evangelicalism after they moved to the U.S. After becoming an anarchist—a journey that involved reading Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* in high school, debating gun control on the message board of a Christian rock band, protesting the Iraq war, and becoming Mennonite—Alexis co-founded a website in the early 2000s that evolved into Jesus Radicals, a network for Jesus-loving anarchists. For 10 years, she helped organize the group's blog and annual conference (on an indefinite hiatus since 2013), which offered an introduction to Christian anarchism as well as trainings on topics such as consensus building, economic disobedience, and community living.

As a black woman, Alexis is a minority within

"Unions, credit unions, farming communes, cooperatives, all these things," said Dorothy Day, are part of "the nonviolent anarchist point of view."

the Christian anarchist community and sometimes struggles to get her fellow Christian anarchists—especially white men—to move past questions about "the state." "How we deal with the state is one aspect of what it means to be trying to live, as much as humanly possible, a life that is resistant to oppressive structures, oppressive patterns, and oppressive patterns of relating to each other." But Christian anarchism is also about "looking for ways of living that do bring out life more abundantly, that are [more] faithful and freer than the structures that are offered to us."

In Elkhart, Ind., where Alexis lives, this means finding creative ways to resist gentrification and other policies that affect "people who are routinely disrespected" in her community: creating a concert series to highlight the city's diverse musical talent, joining an African dance company, and providing accompaniment to a family feeling the pain of police violence. She is a vegan and an animal liberationist. "What I eat, what I wear, what's in my home, is all an attempt to step back from these structures that oppress people, the environment, and of course other animals."

When developers announced plans to build luxury apartments downtown, Alexis started going to city council meetings to protest and advocate for more affordable housing. As an anarchist, Alexis already believed representative democracy was unjust, but watching council members ignore community input and cater to special interests in real time was "eye-opening." When the council voted to close a local community center, she did something radical for an anarchist: she started volunteering with a local mayoral campaign.

Alexis recognizes the irony of an anarchist working on a mayoral campaign; she hasn't voted for a presidential candidate since Bush v. Gore and believes the money and energy that's poured into elections could be better directed elsewhere. But after serious discernment, she felt it was the right thing to do, despite the criticism she knew she'd face from other anarchists. Anarchism has always upheld local autonomy, she explained, and in a town as small as Elkhart, it "really, really, really matters whether there's somebody who's going to perpetuate the same nonsense."

Alexis' candidate won in November 2019. She described the experience as "an inside view of the possibilites and limitations within electoral politics. Though she's glad she participated, "I'm not planning to make this a habit," she said.

A failure of Christian imagination

I first encountered Christian anarchism through the Psalters, a folk-punk band and sometimes-Philadelphia-based intentional community that toured anarchist gatherings and Christian festivals in a black school bus. The band's music—which featured accordions, banjos, a djembe, and, I'm pretty sure, a shofar—had an apocalyptic circus feel. Sample lyrics: "Destruction or deliverance, how's it gonna end? Sometimes you gotta knock it down, so it can be born again."

Call it resurrection, rebirth, or baptism, the mysterious pattern of Jesus is that new life begins with death. Christian anarchists understand this: Where I see only the danger of destruction, Christian anarchists see an opportunity to make way for something closer to the reign of God. Where I feel doubtful that we could create structures that are free—or freer—of injustice, Christian anarchists believe God can do something new in our midst. Christian anarchists see the church's reluctance to think beyond current political systems as a failure of Christian imagination—limiting who Christians are called to be and what we expect God to do.

I asked Alexis, Wildflower, and Van Steenwyk what they'd like to tell Christians like me—people who care about justice but aren't anarchists.

Alexis wants Christians to know that while her "speech might not always be fluffy and warm," she believes—as a Christian and an anarchist—that "we can do better." "It's out of a position of hope that I critique," she said. "It's out of a position of care that I'm critical." She advised U.S. Christians to dig into the not-often-told stories of oppression within our nation's history. "I don't think people often really know the history of things," she explained.

Wildflower "wouldn't try to make them anarchist," he admitted. "I'd probably just try to encourage them in their struggle for justice."

Van Steenwyk urged Christians into deeper solidarity with those who've been screwed by the system. "The Spirit is with those who are suffering oppression, and we can't be the church until we go there with our bodies," he says. "If we start doing that—if we start getting in real solidarity with folks who experience oppression—we will become much more revolutionary people, even if we're not comfortable with the idea of upending the system because it changes your vantage point." ◉

Betsy Shirley is associate editor of *Sojourners* magazine.

WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH OUR WHITE WORKING CLASS? LOOK BEYOND *HILLBILLY ELEGY* FOR THE ANSWERS.

Photo by Christopher Smith

Nonfiction

Donald Trump's victory came mostly from non-college-educated whites in the Appalachian parts of Pennsylvania and Ohio and the deindustrialized Rust Belt regions of Michigan and Wisconsin, including many areas that had voted twice for Barack Obama. As this realization dawned, many affluent, educated, bicoastal liberals began to ask: What's the matter with our white working class? J.D. Vance, who wrote *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and a Culture in Crisis* (2016) and grew up in the Rust Belt, in a family still moored to Appalachian Kentucky, turned out to be just the guy to tell the neoliberal elite what it wanted to hear.

Sure America's industrial economy went to hell in the past four decades, he acknowledged. But Vance said his people haven't pulled out of that slump because of what he called "hillbilly culture"—which, in his telling, seems to consist mostly of drug and alcohol abuse, hair-trigger violence, and a debilitating tendency to blame others for one's problems (i.e. the government, coal or steel companies, Obama, etc.). This, of course, is in stark contrast to what Vance did with his own impoverished circumstances: joined the Marines, went to college and law school, and became a Silicon Valley venture capitalist.

Now, Trump is campaigning again, and Vance is back, too, with the pending release

Getty Images

of a *Hillbilly Elegy* movie directed by Ron Howard. In the interim, a steady stream of other books have appeared, offering more systematic reflections on how some in the white working class became angry enough to give us Trump.

White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America, by Joan C. Williams (2017), was one of the first and, given its limitations, best of the books. Williams confesses to her membership in what she calls the Professional-Managerial Elite (PME). But she's married to a man from working-class origins, a "class migrant," she calls him, and that's helped her see the "cluelessness" of her peers. Williams' message is simple: "When you leave the two-thirds of Americans without college degrees out of your vision of the good life, they notice."

Each of Williams' chapters sets out to answer a clueless PME query, such as "Why Doesn't the Working Class Just Move to Where the Jobs Are?" or "Is the Working Class Just Racist?" She carefully explains how attitudes that appear irrational to the PME make sense. For instance, working-class people don't move because, for them, family and community have always been more reliable sources of security than any job. And, yes, many white working-class people are racist, but so are many elites, just in different ways. White working-class people understandably resent being preached at by them.

But Williams persists in the fantasy that retraining vouchers will fix the inequities brought by "free trade," and suggests no concessions from the PME side on issues such as abortion, except to frame the liberal argument more politely. Still, her explanation of the working-class worldview has been revelatory for many readers.

Justin Gest's *The White Working Class: What Everyone Needs to Know* (2018) covers similar ground as Williams' text and often draws the same conclusions, but it's rooted in Gest's ethnographic study of two working-class communities and bolstered by census data, opinion surveys, and economic studies. But when he draws conclusions, Gest, too, is trapped in the neoliberal consensus. Wholesale redistribution of wealth and power is not an option; instead, the working class needs more education, which will not only equip them for "new economy" jobs but also socialize them into PME culture.

Tex Sample, author of *Working Class Rage: A Field Guide to White Anger and Pain* (2018), will have no truck with that. Sample, a Methodist minister and seminary professor, is a class migrant who never assimilated. He shows readers that working-class people have been robbed in the global economy of recent decades, under both U.S. political parties, and are right to be angry. Sample mainly wants his primary audience of church activists and professionals to both see the radical, system-shaking, kingdom-building potential of white working-class people and help the white working class in perceiving its commonalities with black and brown peers.

The most effective antidote to the *Hillbilly Elegy* syndrome is *Heartland: A Memoir of Working Hard and Being Broke in the Richest Country on Earth*, by Sarah Smarsh (2018). A class migrant in Vance's age range, Smarsh is from the Kansas plains instead of Appalachia, but her family story has plenty of working-class violence, drunkenness, and dysfunction. Still, Smarsh never loses sight of the larger forces that kept her people "broke." It wasn't her grandfather's personal failings that took away the family farm: It was a corporate agriculture policy that told farmers to get big or get out. Neither was it her father's fault that his home-building business failed in 2007. That happened 1,600 miles away, on Wall Street.

It should be little wonder that, with no one else acknowledging that something was wrong, many fell for a phony populist who pushed their buttons on race. Anyone who wants this anger to go in a more positive direction (i.e. toward Wall Street and corporate America) needs to learn how white working-class people see themselves and the world. These books can start that process. ⊗

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WORKING-CLASS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ROBBED IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY OF RECENT DECADES, UNDER BOTH U.S. POLITICAL PARTIES, AND ARE RIGHT TO BE ANGRY.

Danny Duncan Collum, author of the novel *White Boy*, teaches writing at Kentucky State University in Frankfort.

From *Knives Out*

SOMEONE OF CONSEQUENCE

By Abby Olcese

Rian Johnson's film *Knives Out* wastes no time setting up the murder mystery that powers its plot. In the very first scene, famed mystery writer Harlan Thrombey (Christopher Plummer) is found in the library of his mansion, his throat cut. Harlan's family is shocked. His Latina caretaker, Marta (Ana de Armas), Harlan's closest confidant, is devastated. The police think it's a suicide. Private detective Benoit Blanc (Daniel Craig) thinks otherwise.

The mystery of Harlan's death may be the plot of *Knives Out*, but as the story progresses, it's clear that the film is actually about something else.

Bootstrapping—the idea that one can achieve success purely through hard work and determination—is touted in most areas of public life, from business to education to politics. White Americans particularly love to claim that we've risen from tough circumstances while making it harder for less-advantaged populations to do just that.

In *Knives Out*, the bootstrapping myth is everywhere. Harlan's children are proud that their dad built a publishing empire. Harlan's daughter Linda (Jamie Lee Curtis) tells Blanc that she, too, created her own business from the ground up. But, of course, those stories aren't the whole truth. Linda would be nowhere without the hefty loan she got from her father. Harlan himself may have worked hard for his success, but as a white man, there's no doubt his path was easier than it would have been for others.

On the other hand, Marta is patronized by everyone around her except Blanc, who correctly judges her value. The Thrombeys claim she's like family, yet she isn't invited to Harlan's funeral. One of the film's running jokes is that none of the Thrombey clan can recall from which South American country Marta immigrated.

When Harlan's will names Marta the sole beneficiary of his estate, all pretense of care is dropped. The Thrombeys liked Marta, as long as she stayed in her place. The second she becomes someone of consequence, she's seen as a threat. It's the same attitude of entitlement and fear that propelled Donald Trump to the White House in 2016.

Johnson tackles all this with caustic humor and extreme sympathy for Marta, exactly the kind of person Jesus meant when he said "blessed are the meek." The Thrombeys believe money is theirs by right, but Marta's the one who's actually done something to earn it.

While the Agatha Christie trappings of Johnson's movie make it fun, Johnson's merciless skewering of white privilege, and his lifting up of the least of these, is what makes the movie valuable right now. ⊗

Abby Olcese (@abbyolcese) is a freelance film critic and writer based in Kansas.

LET MY PEOPLE GO

Mary Lambert, the Christian, queer, Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter featured in Macklemore and Ryan Lewis' "Same Love," sings of trauma and triumph in her latest album, *Grief Creature*. Abuse, rape, shame, depression: Lambert faces them all. "Sometimes I call it drowning," she says. "Sometimes I call it Moses."

Tender Heart Records

I'm Not Yours

It has never been easy to be a black woman in America. In her latest collection *We Want Our Bodies Back: Poems*, jessica Care moore speaks of the horrors and hurdles she and other black women encounter. In 2020, it's well past time for black women to own themselves.

Amistad

All Who Labor

Resisting injustice can take a lot out of us. With her book *Rest for the Justice-Seeking Soul: 90 Meditations*, minister and activist Susan K. Williams Smith, a chair of the Ohio Poor People's Campaign, hopes to revive our energy by guiding us back to the Holy Spirit.

Whitaker House

WORK THAT MAKES PEOPLE MORE HUMAN

By Faith-Marie Zamblé

Detail from Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's "1 pm, Mason's Yard"

Curated

Dear friend,

It was quite a year, wasn't it? Some might say 2019 was grim: I wish I could disagree. I wish I could offer artwork to capture the world's ills, move us to radical change, or even get us to be kinder to our neighbors. Unfortunately, there is no *one* piece existing on these terms.

Instead, I will tell you something I witnessed in 2019, hope and wonder that I tucked into my coat pocket because it reminded me of what the Kenyan filmmaker Likarion Wainaina said: "I want to make work that makes people more human."

The following, my friend, is a human moment.

In October I attended a deeply moving talk at the Yale Center for British Art. Hilton Als, theater critic for *The New Yorker* and occasional curator, spoke about Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's work and what it means to him. Yiadom-Boakye is a British-Ghanaian painter creating transcendent worlds with her brushes. The results are beautiful images of black people plucked from her imagination, combined with Western canonical influences—particularly Johannes Vermeer's interiority and Alice Neel's frankness. In his engagement with her style, Als toggled assuredly between philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, writer Jamaica Kincaid, artist J.M.W. Turner, and others.

What I found most astonishing, however, wasn't his command of theory, but rather the intimacy with which he spoke, reading from a letter he had written. In that letter he addressed a long-lost companion (of course, I thought of you). He spoke of melancholy borne from the absence of his friend, how they had waited for a black artist like Yiadom-Boakye to come along, and his immense relief when Yiadom-Boakye emerged.

Though Yiadom-Boakye paints as though she has nothing to prove, shifting pigment around the canvas without explicit political connotations, there is something very meaningful about the self-assured blackness in her images. It was thrilling to hear someone expand on this meaning and engage with black art beyond the helpful but limiting lenses of identity politics. And for me, a child of the diaspora, to hear about black art made my joy impossible in its enormity yet also close and simple.

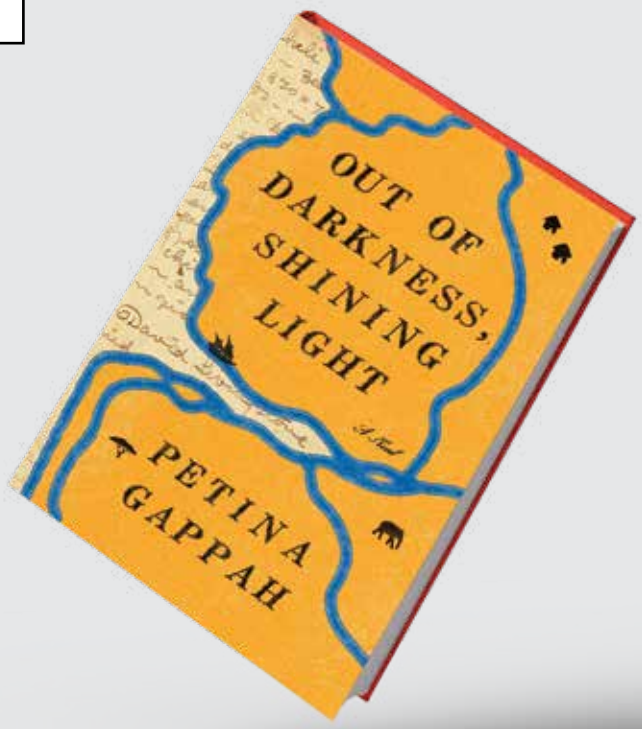
Listening to Als, I also thought about how many biblical texts are in the form of letters. "Churched" folks have mostly been urged to see them as correctional tools, but there is so much more to the epistolary address: love, anguish, despair, wisdom. Letters connect us to the past and future, soldering people together across time and space. Like Paul's words to the Corinthian church, or Yiadom-Boakye's characters emerging from reverie to look at the viewer, or Als reaching back for an estranged friend while talking to an audience. Like you and me, anchored on one end by your eyes and, on the other, my typing fingers.

I tug on the cord that binds us; you tug back. This is being human.

Love, Faith

Faith-Marie Zamblé is an artist, writer, and MFA candidate in dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the Yale School of Drama.

Books



THE HYPOCRISY OF COLONIALISM

Out of Darkness, Shining Light, by Petina Gappah

Scribner

In her latest novel, Petina Gappah reimagines the death of Scottish missionary and doctor David Livingstone, focusing on his African servants, the names history forgot. They are Christians, Muslims, healers, porters, women, and children: a family of strangers who band together to carry Livingstone's body, marching more than 1,500 miles in 285 days, so his remains may be claimed in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, and returned to England.

Every name on this trip holds stories that could occupy a novel of their own. To encompass them, Gappah employs two distinct narrators: Halima and Jacob Wainwright.

Halima, the doctor's cook, is known for her sharp tongue, which ridicules the caprice of men and repeatedly tells of her youth as a sultan's slave. In the early days of the journey with Livingstone's body, Halima mourns the doctor, whom she calls "Bwana (Master) Daudi," like a paternal figure. Though the men on the journey take credit, she is the one who proposes a way to preserve the doctor's corpse for the long road ahead.

* * *

HALIMA'S LOVE FOR THE BWANA DOES NOT PREVENT HER FROM NOTING HIS CONTRADICTIONS.

But Halima's love for the bwana does not prevent her from noting his contradictions. She wonders why he would leave his family to search for the source of the Nile, argues with his colonial perception of a children's game, and questions how a man who condemns the slave trade would have one of their company whipped.

In a scene rife with her satiric humor, Halima laments on behalf of Livingstone's children: "The thought of those poor children in that far-off land, so cold, so dark, and so dreadfully poor, with a mother who died from *pombe* and a father who died looking for rivers, wandering and wandering like he had no home, made me sorry, and I asked Chuma to name all of them." By deploying moments of levity, Gappah humanizes her characters with a range that colonization rarely allows.

Where Halima is a cook and a bondswoman, Jacob is a freed slave, educated at the Nassick School in British-occupied Bombay. Where Halima dreams of a house to call her own, Jacob dreams of ordination and receiving due glory for his role in Livingstone's final journey. Unlike Halima, Jacob insists on his identity as an outsider, superior because of his proximity to the white man.

Jacob narrates the mission of transporting Livingstone's body in diary-like entries, painting a lofty self-portrait that reveals his blind spots. While his self-righteousness limits his access to the lives around him, Jacob's biblical allusions evoke Exodus, rendering an epic tale of love, loss, and betrayal on a bitter road paved with bones. Ultimately, when Jacob tries to reveal Livingstone's troubling role in the machinery of slavery, his superiors remind him of his limits as a black man.

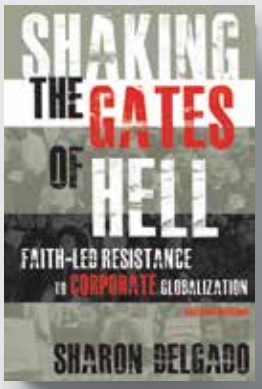
With her masterful, multilayered storytelling, Gappah examines the hypocrisy of colonialism while imagining a world for the characters subsumed by the shadow of slavery. ⊗

Elinam Agbo holds an MFA from the University of Michigan's Helen Zell Writers' program. Born in Ghana, she grew up in Kansas.

TRUTH TO THE POWERS

Shaking the Gates of Hell: Faith-Led Resistance to Corporate Globalization, Second Edition, by Sharon Delgado

Fortress Press



Jesus has the first word in *Shaking the Gates of Hell:* his warning against serving Mammon as master. We are on notice that this book on analyzing and resisting the assaults of global economy will do so by way of biblical spirituality. To put it more precisely, Sharon Delgado's critique will rest on a foundational theology of the principalities and powers.

The book begins in a jail cell, where she was in lock-up following arrest in 1999 as part of the massive demonstrations known as the Battle in Seattle, which effectively shut down meetings of the World Trade Organization. Shake those gates. Rooted in action, prayers in such places can seed entire volumes. Also to say: This book is punctuated with personal stories, pastoral and political.

That Fortress Press has seen fit to publish this updated edition is testimony to its staying power as a substantive primer. There are new sections on "algobot" market investing, racial profiling, mass incarceration, and the path to permanent war. Climate predictions that seemed dire in the first edition already need to be updated, as timelines shorten and catastrophic realities set in.

Structurally, the first third of the book focuses on "the undoing of creation" (a phrase of William Stringfellow's defining "the fall"). Much of that is devoted to the wounds of Earth, and then to human wounds by toxification, technology, impoverishment, and violence.

The middle third, equally rigorous, illuminates the structures of power that collude in the domination systems of empire, in finance capitalism, and neoliberal ideology. It is here that the theological work of Stringfellow and Walter Wink on the principalities and the powers-that-be proves so practical. The corporations, the military machinery, the unholy trinity of the WTO, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank are all, with biblical precision, exposed in their demonic spirituality, their fallen self-interest, which not only fails to serve creation and human life, but openly assaults them. Fallen, indeed.

Stringfellow once named the state as pre-eminent among the hierarchy of principalities. However, almost immediately he began to wonder aloud if the commercial principalities in their global aggressions had not in fact superseded the state as prevailing powers, usurping it in decision-making.

If the global powers have a spiritual dimension, then spiritual tactics must be in the mix for resistance and transformation. Here, a return to the life of Jesus, an extended account of his struggle to live humanly, subverting the domination system, serves well. Among recent examples like Occupy, Standing Rock, the Poor Peoples Campaign, and New Sanctuary, one wishes for a look at the Sunrise Movement or Extinction Rebellion, but direct action is urgently pressed, as are the politics of policy, prayer, and preaching.

All in all, the book presents truth to the powers, and to the people of the Spirit. ⊗

Bill Wylie-Kellermann, a *Sojourners* contributing editor, is a community activist, author, teacher, and pastor in Detroit. Among his recent books is *Principalities in Particular*.

AND THEY WERE NOT ASHAMED

Beyond Shame: Creating a Healthy Sex Life on Your Own Terms, by Matthias Roberts

Fortress Press

Matthias Roberts is a licensed mental-health counselor and host of Queerology: A Podcast on Belief and Being. *He spoke with* Sojourners *associate editor Betsy Shirley about his book* Beyond Shame.

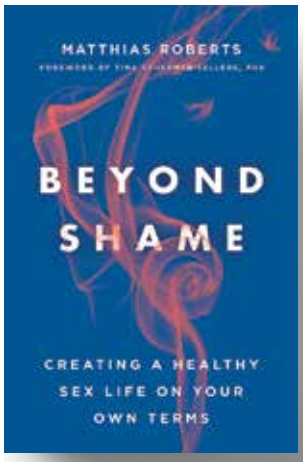
Sojourners: Why write a book on sex and faith and shame?

Matthias Roberts: Many of us who grew up within purity culture have rejected the strict, moralistic guidelines around sex and sexuality we were raised with, but aren't sure what beliefs we do still hold. As a counselor, I noticed coping mechanisms that aren't necessarily the mosthealthy ways to work with our sexuality. I hope to name what those unhealthy coping mechanisms are and chart a way forward.

What is sexual shame? Shame is a core response that we have that makes us turn away. When things within our sexuality make us want to turn away from either ourselves or other people, we get sexual shame. Sexual shame affects us relationally—and not just within our sexual relationships. It can look like secrecy and avoidance: We've been taught we can't express sexuality outside of particular contexts and yet most people are, so we hide that away, lie about it, or pretend it's not there.

One of the coping mechanisms you've observed among many Christians raised within purity culture is what you call "shamelessness," or "casting off all the rules, all the boxes, all voices telling us how to live our lives." Why can that be harmful? We can easily do violence to ourselves and other people when we're so concerned about not feeling shame. We're using our sexuality almost as a tool—using ourselves and other people to avoid our shame. This can cause major relational harm.

What message about sex would you like to hear from Christian leaders? It would be so healing to hear that it's okay to make mistakes and learn from your experiences. It'd be great to hear pastors say, "We're here for you—when you are teens and young adults and even later in life—as you go through a process of learning and becoming." ⊗



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WE CAN EASILY DO VIOLENCE TO OURSELVES AND OTHER PEOPLE WHEN WE'RE SO CONCERNED ABOUT NOT FEELING SHAME.

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SOJOURNERS

Poetry

1619/WHITE

By Devon Miller-Duggan

1. I knew, but didn't know—extent, sprawl,
continent-wide bird with great shadow-wings
hovering over a whole nation's knife-opened birth—
talons and curved-hook raptor's beak coming
for my heart, which is history,
which shields itself and hungers
as though truth were a flock of season-following geese
from whom I choose how many to bag,
how many a season requires. So many
moments sound like gun-shot—
sound cracking the ear with its own hammer,
pummeling some dark priest-hole in every mind,
fists on doors, slammed hatches on ships,
iron coming down so hard on a deck it loses its clang,
a skull punched against echoing wood, snapped branches,
snap of a jaw-trap around leg bone.
An eagle cannot feed its young its young.

2. I discover I am of starvation, but not my own fields.
I am of fruit but have no sugar, of blood and darkness
beneath my white skin. I am product and consumption.
Un-owned, unseeing, unsold.
House and household, we have stolen stolen mothers' children,
made other children's mothers into vessels,
handsful of dust, broken open over, over, over.
I am none of it and all,
God forgive my blood, I am of ignorance
so large I cannot claim or colonize it.
No right to silence, have a tongue never bitten bloody for hiding,
have no right to speech, no right to silence.
My planet's lungs blaze so high a satellite can see
and send back photographs; in another camera's lens
one small girl, soft curls lit by searchlights' saw-toothed beams
screams at 20 men who hide behind their hard-thick-heavy belts.
I never learn her name.
Another child drowns with her parents crossing a border river—Valeria.
Another child drowned on another shore—Alan.
I uncover my heart.
Great wings shadow it;
the great beak tears it from me;
great talons fill the cavity with sea-wrack.
My heart is a knot of frayed rope, barnacles, a link of iron chain,
still it takes my blood and feeds blood-guilt out again, stuttering.
No right to blindness. No right to fall.

Devon Miller-Duggan teaches at the University of Delaware. Her most recent collection of poetry is *The Slow Salute*.

SERVICE SHOWCASE

PUT YOUR FAITH INTO ACTION.

"Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. ... Yours are the hands with which he is to bless his people." — St. Teresa of Avila

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Bon Secours Volunteer Ministry provides young adults a unique opportunity to participate in the Sisters of Bon Secours' commitment to justice in radical solidarity with those most in need. Placements in Baltimore, Md., and Richmond, Va., in health care, education, and social service.

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johnsonservicecorps.org

Johnson Service Corps is an ecumenical community of young adults dedicated to social justice living in Chapel Hill and Durham, N.C. JSC offers a year of service, vocational discernment, intentional community living, and spiritual formation.

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lorettovolunteers.org/application

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Sojourners
Yearlong program
sojo.net/fellows

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WHERE CAN WE FIND GOD?

Scripture passages are from the Revised Common Lectionary, Cycle A.

By M. Daniel Carroll R.

Living the Word

Several Christian traditions celebrate the season of Epiphany from the feast of the Epiphany (Jan. 6), which celebrates the arrival of the Magi (Matthew 2), through Transfiguration Sunday, which falls before Ash Wednesday, marking the beginning of the season of Lent. "Epiphany" is from a Greek word meaning "to reveal." Jesus was revealed to the non-Jewish world through the Magi and continued to show himself in multiple ways throughout his ministry, culminating (before the resurrection) in the glorious appearance on the mountain (Matthew 17). There, Jesus' disciples saw the fullness of his glory. Their response was one of awe and reverence, but even that missed the importance of the moment. God spoke from heaven saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (17:5). What were they to hear from Jesus? What are we?

Is it possible that we have experienced something special and then want to praise the Lord, but still misunderstand what is required for acceptable worship? From what kind of people does God receive praise? Who qualifies to come into God's presence and worship? Do attitudes and actions toward others matter? These are the questions that drive our devotional reflections this month.

It is often said that true worship must come from the heart. That is true as far as it goes—but these passages teach us that worship is very much a matter of our hands and feet too. The arena that molds us into a people fit for worship is the public square.

M. Daniel Carroll R., a member of the steering committee of the Hispanic Theological Initiative, is Blanchard Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College in Illinois.

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WE NEED WORSHIP TO MAKE SENSE OF OUR ACTIVISM.

FEBRUARY 2

SUED BY GOD?

MICAH 6:1-8; PSALM 15;
1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31; MATTHEW 5:1-12

Who can enter before God to worship? asks the psalmist. Psalm 15 lists the virtues that are expected in order to enter for worship: truth-telling, care and respect of neighbor, and open-handed generosity. These qualities are to be practiced in everyday life, especially with the disadvantaged.

Micah 6:8 is well-known in justice circles—"to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." But it is easy to miss the full thrust and context of this message. In Micah 6, the Lord brings a lawsuit against the people for forgetting *what* (notice how many times this word appears in verses 1-8) had been done on their behalf. In the ancient world, when the gods were angry, they had to be appeased with gifts. This idea drives the question in Micah 6:6: *What* will the Lord demand to turn from judgment?

Many from nonliturgical traditions answer the questions in verses 6-7 with a resounding "No!" No, we won't come before the Lord with "burnt offerings" or "calves." But, in the ancient world, a religious person would have said, "Yes!" The more extravagant the offering the better! The last option, though, would give pause: Our firstborn?

Illustration by Jackson Joyce

God's response to what the Lord requires comes in verse 8: We are "to do justice," "to love kindness," and "to walk humbly with God." The Lord wants us involved in acts of justice done in sacrificial love toward others, not self-righteously or for our own gain. The third demand is important: We walk humbly with God as we embody this. This is not *our* work; it is God's work. Involvement in work for justice and mercy is good, says Micah, and required for acceptable worship. As we do this work, we can claim the blessing of Jesus (Matthew 5:1-12).

FEBRUARY 9

ROADBLOCKED BY SIN

ISAIAH 58:1-12; PSALM 112:1-10;
1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-16; MATTHEW 5:13-20

Where can we find God? This is the cry of the human heart. Many think that performing some religious ritual is the key to connecting with God. Isaiah 58 says that Israel believed that the Lord would respond to their fasting. If they did without food, then that would get God's attention! But the passage tells us that sin was the real roadblock. Their sin negated self-righteous self-denial. What was this sin?

The fast God demanded was self-sacrificial provision of justice for the needy. Blessing would come if they did these things; then, their fasting would reflect a truly penitent and compassionate heart. For us, the needy are the poor, widows and orphans, trafficked women and children, immigrants and refugees, and so many more. Psalm 112 echoes this message and adds that a just person can feel secure in the Lord. Jesus uses the images of salt and light as a call to point the world to right living (Matthew 5:13-16). In obedience we fulfill the commandments and are deemed righteous (verses 17-20).

These passages turn on its head any worship that celebrates the quality of the musical performance and the entertainment value of the preaching. They undermine any confidence that church attendance guarantees God's favor. In the Bible there is no separating a life dedicated to justice from acceptable religious practices. We need justice to give substance to our faith; we need worship because our activism makes no sense without our faith. This is how we can find God.

FEBRUARY 16

OUTDATED RITUALS?

SIRACH 15:15-20; PSALM 119:1-8;
1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9; MATTHEW 5:21-37

Christians often recoil when they hear the word "law," as introduced here by the psalmist. They may assume that it refers to a legalistic religion left behind with the coming of Jesus. But why does the Bible tell us that the law is good, worthy of praise, and a joy? The problem is that we assume that the law refers only to outdated rituals.

The law of Moses contains instructions about every area of life—food, family, property, care of animals, and much more—all bound together within a deeply religious worldview. It also has a lot to say about caring for widows, orphans, the poor, and foreigners. In other words, to love the law and the commandments is to embrace God's social concerns.

God's commitment to the needy was made concrete in many laws for their protection and provision. In Matthew 5, Jesus reminds us these laws were not only about external actions. God looks much deeper: Respect for others is a window into the heart. This is serious business. These passages in Matthew warn against taking God's social demands lightly.

Have we ever considered that legislation for the needy actually matters to God? For example, we should be encouraged that working for reform in our immigration laws and refugee policies is actually pleasing to God. The Lord matched compassion for the needy with specific laws in ancient Israel, and so must we. Our efforts to make our nation's laws more just—even if others do not understand our motivation—reveal our obedience and are one way God is at work today.

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THE ARENA THAT MOLDS US INTO A PEOPLE FIT FOR WORSHIP IS THE PUBLIC SQUARE.

FEBRUARY 23

MAJESTIC MOMENTS

EXODUS 24:12-18; PSALM 2;
2 PETER 1:16-21; MATTHEW 17:1-9

When we see something amazing (like a sunset, a mountain, or a beautiful forest) or go to a special event (like a graduation, a wedding, or a ministry celebration), we want to remember it. We take pictures, trying to capture the moment. Somehow those photos never reproduce how it felt to be there and actually see what we saw.

When Jesus takes three disciples up a mountain and appears in full glory at the transfiguration, Peter wants to build shelters for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. How incredible! It was like God's appearance to Moses in a cloud on another mountain (Exodus 24). It was the epiphany of God's Son (Psalm 2). In those days, Jews connected the coming of the Messiah with Moses and Elijah, and here they were all together! If they could build those shelters, then they might hold on to that experience for themselves and others.

They misunderstood what had happened and were forbidden to tell anyone what they had seen. It was impossible to freeze the event. More important, this epiphany was a foretaste of Jesus' resurrection (Matthew 17:9). His death would come at the hands of the authorities (16:21-23), and that death meant that the disciples would carry their own cross (16:24-28). Glory follows suffering.

As we do God's work, we may have glimpses of God's majesty. This is a privilege and a joy. Instead of trying to package that experience, let's put it into perspective. It is a preview of something beyond what we can imagine: a greater revelation of Jesus, who shares his glory with us. That truth is enough to hold on to. ⊗

"Preaching the Word," Sojourners' online resource for Bible study and sermon preparation, is available at sojo.net/ptw.

H'rumphs

NEW YEAR'S REVOLUTIONS

By Ed Spivey Jr.

Do people make New Year's resolutions anymore? Is that still a thing? I'm asking because maybe it's time we stop pretending we'll lose weight in the coming year, or learn a new language, or defend democracy. Best to admit that lethargy is the only promise we keep to ourselves and settle for the small goals we can achieve. Such as eating with the family without your cell phone. Okay, forget that one. We have to walk before we can run.

My personal goal for the new year is to improve my emoji selection. It's fun to add those cute little pictures to texts, but when I try to click on "thumbs up" from that tightly packed list of icons, I somehow click on "high heel shoe" instead. I have no problem with women's footwear, but it's not a good fit (I wear a 9 narrow) for most of my messages. And it requires lengthy re-texting to clarify it was a mistake and stop trying to read something into it and, no, it's not a subliminal retro jab at a woman's right to shoes. I tried switching to the "high-five," but it's positioned perilously close to "face of a terrified cat" and "bright red lips," neither appropriate to my usual texts, which mainly consist of "heading home now" ["thumbs up"] and "Yes, I will pick up milk" ["terrified cat" with "high heel shoe"]. "Oops, sorry" ["barfing smiley face"]. What?!

You've probably already mastered emojis and are raising the caliber of your texts with video gifs using actual cats (without high heels), thus proving your maturity as a citizen in modern society. Unlike me, you're ready to get serious about the coming year. You are positive, you are hopeful, and your glass is half full. (Coasters, please!) You can bravely open your wings toward the future—to make a difference, to take a stand, to take the road less traveled, even though that road has fewer Dunkin' Donuts.

* * *

THIS ELECTION YEAR, A CHANGE IS GONNA COME. OR NOT.

And in this long-awaited election year—just crying out for some spot-on political emojis that I can never find (Are they after the cute animals? Nope. Construction icons.)—maybe we can focus on the beauty of the democratic process. Ours is a country where anyone can grow up to be president, regardless of race, gender, or creed (Is creed, like, a religion? Or maybe just different hobbies? Does it have its own emoji?). In this nation we can watch diverse candidates passionately debate each other in the marketplace of ideas, giving the American people a dynamic choice between opposing viewpoints before they finally elect another rich white guy.

Not that I'm against Michael Bloomberg. (Emoji warning: "Monopoly banker guy" is copyrighted. Plus, we shouldn't make fun of rich people; they've suffered enough.) But this billionaire thinks he's exempt from the retail politics other candidates have been doing for months. If Mayor Pete has to eat pork rinds at Iowa county fairs, why shouldn't Bloomberg? If Amy Klobuchar has to feign enthusiasm over a nativity scene made entirely of cheese, or pose for a thousand selfies with Americans who, coincidentally, often smell like cheese, why should Bloomberg be exempt? After all, it's not the cheese that smells, it's America! [Insert patriotic emoji of smiley face with, disturbingly, American flags for eyes.]

So, get busy, Michael Bloomberg. America needs to hear your plans for health care and infrastructure. But first, you need to eat a corn dog. ⊗

Ed Spivey Jr. is art director of *Sojourners* magazine.

Illustration by Ken Davis

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Reuters

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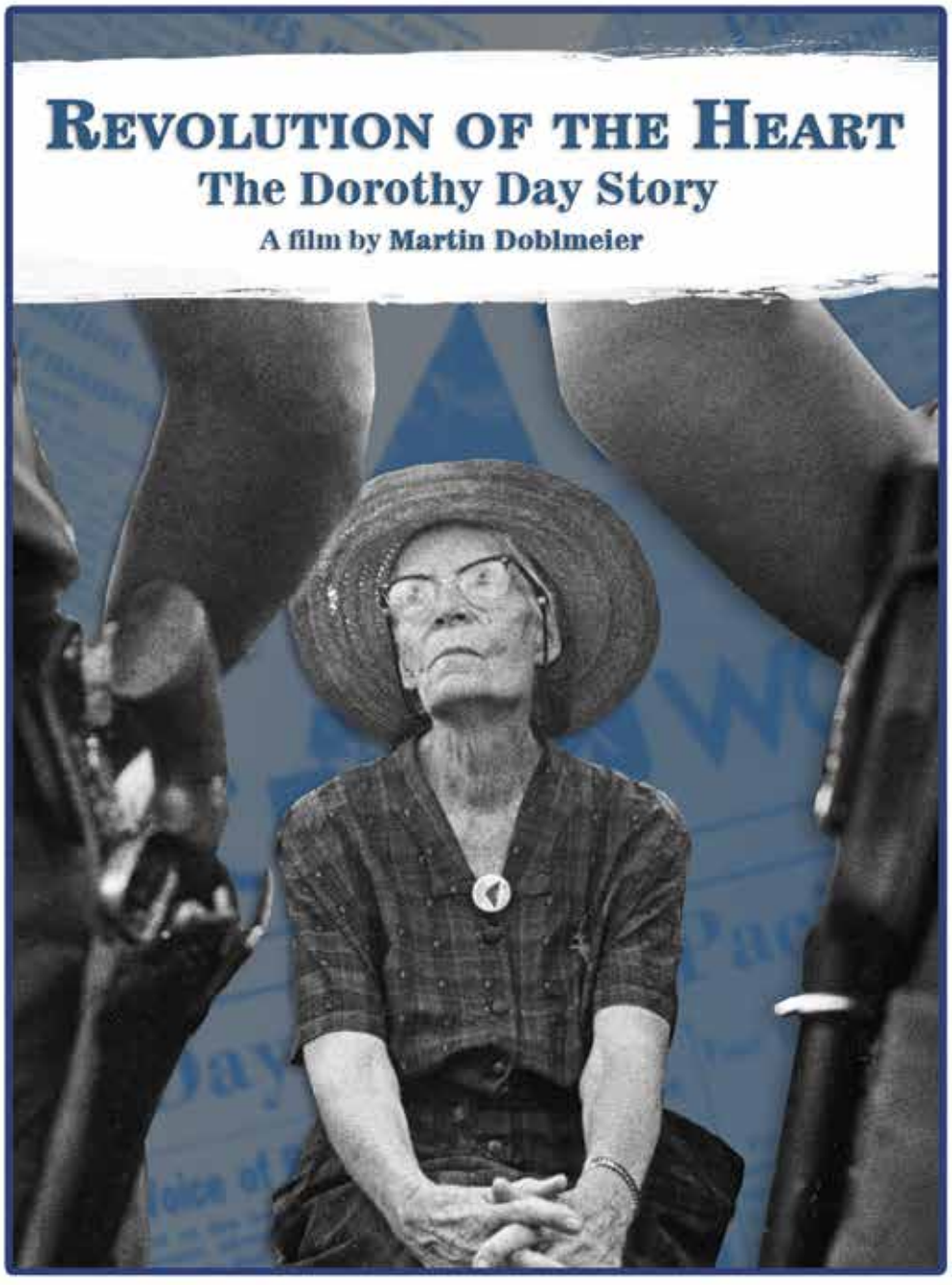

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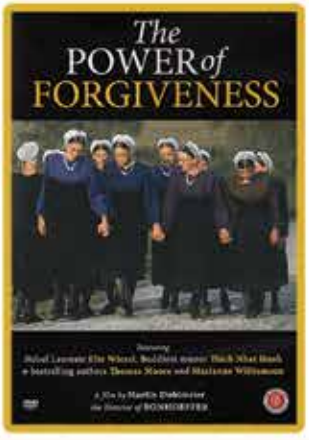

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